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SUBJECT Development and Results of French  
"Winter Offensive" in Tonkin

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1. The long-heralded and much advertised "winter offensive" of the French in Tonkin started 7 October 1947, and practically ceased by 19 November 1947. The purpose of this offensive was a double one:

- a. Political: The Hongkong conference between Bao Dai and "representatives of all Indochinese political parties" and French representatives in September 1947 was not a serious attempt to construct a new government. It was rather an effort to throw confusion and dissension into the ranks of the Vietnamese resistants. The next move in this political offensive was to be the military operation to display French military might, to terrorize and discourage the population of Tonkin, and to produce a popular desire for peace at any price. The military operation was timed at this moment also for another reason: it was the season of the rice harvest, which provided an opportunity for the French to accomplish widespread destruction of the crops and to introduce the element of famine into the Viet Minh areas.

- b. Military: The avowed military purpose was to encircle the Viet Nam Army and to capture the Viet Nam Government. If this should fail, the minimum military objective would be to disorganize Viet Nam military resistance, to cut lines of communication, and to isolate Viet Nam military units from their headquarters.

2. For this offensive, the French employed about 50,000 troops, or about one-half the total of their troops in Indochina. The forces which they employed included three infantry divisions, two thousand parachutists and some gunboats (number unknown). The infantry units included the 43rd Regiment of Colonial Infantry and the 5th Moroccan Regiment. The names of the other units are not available. The parachutists were furnished almost exclusively with British equipment and were transported in Dakota planes. Practically the whole of the French airforce in Indochina was used. The gunboats operated in the Red River and the River Lo, especially in the neighborhood of Viet Tri (105-25, 21-20).

3. The offensive commenced with parachute operations, preceded by regular French air-bombings of the cities involved. (These bombings were conducted without much imagination, and in fact took place daily for several days at exactly the same hour. This fact enabled the Vietnamese to take reasonable safety precautions, and in at least one case (Cao Bang) to shoot down a French plane.) On October 7, 1947, parachutists seized Cho Moi (105-45, 21-50)

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and Bac Kan (105-50, 22-10). On October 9, 1947, paratroopers seized Cao Bang (106-20, 22-40) and Cao Don (105-40, 22-10). An idea of the scale of these parachute operations may be obtained from the fact that in the seizure of Cao Bang, about five hundred paratroopers participated. They arrived in two waves, each consisting of twelve to fifteen Dakotas, each Dakota containing about twenty paratroopers. After the first wave was landed, the planes returned to Lang Son (106-45, 21-50) and picked up the personnel to form the second wave, which they then transported to Cao Bang. The second wave arrived three hours after the first. (The two principal air bases of the French in Tonkin are Hanoi and Lang Son. Because of its geographical position, it was natural for the French to use the Lang Son base for this parachute operation.)

4. The Viet Nam forces made no attempt to resist the French seizure of these points. Both because of the preliminary bombing, and also through their own intelligence network, the Vietnamese were already aware of French intentions, and had already destroyed the cities in accord with their well-known and thorough-going "scorched earth" technique. In the case of Cao Bang, they had already removed the local government (including documents, Executive Committees, and administrative machinery) to Huoc Hai (106-10, 22-40). In their parachute operations, the French suffered considerable losses (no estimate available), partly because of insufficient training. The Viet Nam forces, having retired from the destroyed cities to the surrounding country, were able partially to encircle the French paratroopers; they then engaged in numerous small attacks, and killed or captured a large number of paratroopers before the French infantry units were able to arrive to relieve them.
5. The French intended to perform their military encirclement of the Viet Nam Army by means of a great pincers movement. The first arm of the pincers was to proceed from Hoa Binh (105-25, 20-50) through Son Tay (105-30, 21-15), Viet Tri (105-25, 21-10), and Tuyen Quang (105-15, 21-50) to Dai Tri (105-25, 22-15), leaving garrisons at all important points on the way. (At this time, Tuyen Quang, which had formerly been the seat of part of the Viet Nam Government, was wholly destroyed, and no longer had any special significance.) This arm of the pincers was supported by the French gunboats in the Red River and the River Lo, shelling the villages and towns along the shore. The second arm of the pincers was to proceed from Lang Son through Cao Bang and join the first at Dai Tri.
6. The infantry operation did not succeed according to expectations. Mined roads, continual Viet Nam hit-and-run attacks, and ambushes, particularly in narrow valleys, hampered the advance of the two arms of the pincers. The first arm was slowed up by this action and was finally brought to a halt as a result of a battle in early November, on the road between Tuyen Quang and Dai Tri. This battle was regarded as a great victory by the Vietnamese, and has been much celebrated in their propaganda. Similarly, the second arm of the pincers, having occupied Cao Bang and relieved the remaining paratroopers holding it, was halted in its advance from Cao Bang to Dai Tri. The result was that the two arms of the pincers failed to join.
7. The Viet Nam tactics which succeeded in preventing the French from accomplishing their objective were the characteristic ones: to destroy, rather than defend threatened cities, to allow the French to occupy the ruins, to await the emergence of French convoys from these new bases and then to attack them by ambush and in narrow valleys, and at the same time to multiply and increase guerrilla attacks on rear bases (in this case, even bases as far to the rear as Hanoi and Saigon).
8. The French withdrawal began on 19 November. The first arm of the pincers withdrew to Tuyen Quang, and then split into two parts, of which the first withdrew along the road through Viet Tri and Vinh Yen (105-50, 21-20) to Hanoi, and the second withdrew via Thai Nguyen (105-50, 21-35) to Hanoi.

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9. The "winter offensive" certainly failed in its grand objective of capturing the Viet Nam Government. In fact, certain officials of that Government, who had been captured by the French in November-December 1946 and were consequently unable to occupy their posts since then, actually succeeded in escaping from their French captors in March during the period of the French "winter offensive." These ministers included Dang Phu Thong, Minister of Communications, and two or three other ministers or vice-ministers. The offensive had also failed only in its objective of encircling and destroying the Viet Nam Army. In fact many French units found themselves encircled by the Vietnamese. No reasonable estimate of the losses inflicted upon the military of either side is available. However, because of the nature of the fighting, it seems probable that the actual casualties inflicted by the French on the Viet Nam military were extremely small. Principally, it was the civilian population which suffered.

10. Nevertheless, in a certain sense, the French "winter offensive" achieved substantial results. In the first place, it did dislocate the communications and coordination of the Viet Nam Army, and did isolate a number of its units from their headquarters. This success must be considered temporary, as the French withdrawal has permitted re-grouping. (On the debit side from the French point of view is the fact that the Vietnamese captured from the convoys a great amount of useful material, especially vitally-needed medicines.) In the second place, the French withdrawal was not complete, and they have continued to hold at least one important point captured during the offensive, namely, Cao Bang. This place was in the spring of 1947 considered by the Vietnamese to be inalienable, and was prepared as their last stronghold in case of continuing French successes.

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Note: In a political sense, the accomplishments of the "winter offensive" are more considerable. It forced the Vietnamese to continue and to renounce their scorched earth policy, with its attendant hardships, dislocations, misery and bitterness for the civilian population. It also inflicted directly a great amount of suffering on the people, in many cases causing the massacre of the populations of whole villages. Perhaps most important, it destroyed vast quantities of growing crops which were ready for harvest, and produced a threat of really serious famine in the Viet Minh areas for the first time since 1945. These accomplishments have added to the war-weariness of the people and tended to discredit the Viet Minh as being the sole and final obstacle to the restoration of peace.

In the spring of 1947, it seemed certain that the French would sooner or later be forced to negotiate with the Viet Minh for the reason that, voluntarily or involuntarily, nearly the whole of the population supported the Viet Minh. This basic support still exists, but because of American support of the anti-Communist elements in France, the French Government has received some moral encouragement in regard to Indochina. It still recognizes that negotiations must ultimately be held with the Viet Minh, but will not conduct them itself. It will continue to try to enfeeble the Viet Minh (and the "winter offensive", as has been seen, was not without some success in this respect), then permit its puppet Bao Dai to negotiate with the Viet Minh, and, finally, assist Bao Dai to continue to enfeeble the Viet Minh.

It is probable that the French are now preparing to concentrate on Cochinchina in a somewhat similar pattern, with General Nguyen Van Xuan probably destined to play the eventual role of negotiator with the Viet Minh for Cochinchina. The start of the French military offensive in Cochinchina will probably be timed so as to produce the greatest possible crop destruction just prior to the second rice-harvest in May.

On balance, the "winter offensive" must be considered a moderate success for French imperialism.)

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